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ABSTRACT

The complexity of rural practice in rural and remote communities means that higher order skills are required by rural social workers. In 1991, the University of Ballarat in Victoria (Australia) began teaching a course to prepare students for work in rural social welfare. The course was developed partly to meet industry needs, as local agencies were unable to attract qualified staff. While generic skills, such as counseling and group work, are taught, they are taught with emphasis on particular issues likely to occur in rural settings. Contextual issues include the role of the practitioner as a professional and a community member, confidentiality and privacy, and working within and between complex social networks. Existing courses of social work and welfare address rural practice in a peripheral fashion, whereas rural practice is thoroughly integrated into all elements of this course: course philosophy, curriculum design, teaching strategies, and assessment. The course's philosophical approach emphasizes community development principles of engagement and empowerment within communities. A brief framework of the course and evaluations completed by staff and students are provided. (Contains 15 references.) (TD)

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PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Rural Social Welfare: Preparing Students To Work Effectively In Rural Communities: An Australian Experience

Rosemary Green, Australia

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PAPER PRESENTATIONS
Rural Social Welfare: Preparing Students To Work Effectively In Rural Communities: An Australian Experience

Rosemary Green, Australia

Abstract:

The complexity of rural practice in rural and remote communities indicates that higher order skills are required by social workers. (Sturmey, 1992). The University of Ballarat is a regional university serving a large rural community in Western Victoria, Australia. In 1991 it began teaching a course in rural social welfare, to prepare students for work in social and community services in rural areas. Partly the course was developed to meet industry needs, as local agencies were unable to attract qualified staff, and young people moving to urban centres for training often did not return to work in their communities. While teaching generic skills, such as counselling, and group work, these are taught with emphasis on particular issues likely to occur in rural settings. The role of the practitioner as a professional, and also a community member, confidentiality and privacy, working within and between complex social networks are contextual issues that must be considered. As the course has a focus on preparing students to work effectively within rural communities, the course takes a strong philosophical approach using community development principles of engagement and empowerment within communities. This paper provides a brief framework of the course, the importance of working with rural communities, and evaluations completed by staff and students.

Rural welfare and community work in Australia is exciting, with many opportunities to develop a range of skills and expertise to an advanced level. Rural welfare practitioners must be able to negotiate the range of personal, professional and practice demands essential to effective and strong rural practice. The adaptability of the worker to new and alien contexts is a vital component of successful rural practice. (Sturmey, 1992). To adapt is more than simply understanding the socio-economic and cultural aspects of practice, as rural and remote workers live, raise families and become part of the community in which they work (Cheers & Lonne 1999). Relocating to rural practice may be initially disempowering, despite a high level of training or experience, as workers adapt to a new culture and establish their identity within a community. Some never adapt, and stay a year or so "in the bush," visiting larger urban centres most weekends and holidays, and bemoaning the lack of "culture and decent coffee."

In rural areas in Australia, there is an expectation of welfare or social workers to be able to work on many levels of practice. These expectations arise from the community, employing agencies, and workers themselves as they endeavour to address the varied needs of people in their local and regional communities. Welfare workers in rural areas are likely to be generalists rather than specialists, particularly in smaller rural areas. In larger regional centres, specialist services may be available eg. relationship counselling, or drug and alcohol specialist counsellors, but in less populous areas, the worker will be the main reference point for people experiencing personal and social problems.

Studies in a wide range of social, health, education and economic indicators have indicated that rural Australians face great disadvantages when compared to urban Australians (Cheers, 1992; Sjostedt, 1999;Tituaer, Trickett, & Bhatia, 1997). There is no doubt that rural Australians face many and complex social problems. (Alston, 1992, 1999). The high rate of suicide in rural areas, particularly among young people, is but one indicator of the difficulties being experienced in non urban areas of Australia (Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services, 1997).

Rural social or welfare workers in Australia, are more likely to undertake community development, social planning, community consultation, management and research, and operate within the community using informal helping processes and networks than their urban counterparts (Pucket & Frederico, 1992; Cheers & Lonne, 1999).

The rural practitioner must understand and analyse the professional, political, economic and cultural aspects of the context, work within complex and often dense social networks, while being a member of the community. The fact that the worker lives within and is part of the community can create role problems. Ethical dilemmas and issues of personal privacy and security can arise, particularly if the worker is working in sensitive areas such as family violence or child protection. The setting of effective and maintainable professional and personal boundaries is often critical in successful rural welfare practice.

Frequently rural workers are employed in small agencies, or work alone. Supervision, support, and professional development needs of rural and remote practitioners are constant topics of discussion at conferences and in the literature.

From the employing agencies' experiences, attracting and retaining qualified personnel in rural and remote areas is difficult (Bradley, 1999). Several professional groups, and government bodies in Australia are working to address this problem with initiatives in training and recruitment.

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To address the difficulties experienced by social and community industry in attracting effective qualified staff to rural areas of Victoria, the University of Ballarat, a small regional university, established a course to train welfare workers for professional practice in rural areas in 1991. A secondary goal was to provide training opportunities for people within the region, on the premise that once qualified, they would be likely to stay and work within rural communities.

Ballarat is a regional centre, with a population of about 100,000 and is about one and a half hours driving time from Melbourne, the State's capital. Ballarat is a major service centre, and provides specialist health and aged care services, education, and banking to the region. The University sees itself as both dependent on the region for its existence, and as a contributor to social, economic and community development.

Rural Practice in the Curriculum

The B.A.Rural Social Welfare was one of the first degree programs in welfare in Victoria, and its focus on rural practice is a distinguishing feature. Rural practice in the curriculum within existing courses of both social work and welfare is usually consigned to an elective, or included peripherally, (Sturmey, 1992), an approach often mirrored in other areas of professional education. Often it is considered to be merely a change in context, or as simply requiring knowledge of a specific culture. Geographical barriers, the conservatism of the country, and the impact of the context on the provision of services have been main themes (York, Denton, & Moran 1989).

This course developed rural practice as an integrated part of the welfare curriculum.. From course philosophy and recruitment and selection, through to curriculum design, teaching strategies, learning and assessment tasks, the emphasis is on how best to prepare students to work effectively in rural communities.

The B.A. Rural Social Welfare Course

a. Philosophy:

The course includes a strong philosophical approach. The foundation to the course is the importance for effective welfare practice of:

- a critical analysis of individual, social, cultural, environmental and structural factors relevant to welfare practice with particular reference to rural areas,
- relating personal difficulties to the social and political context,
- acknowledging and respect for differing ideologies, values and social functioning of individuals and communities, particularly rural communities
- rationale of current social policy initiatives and their impact on rural communities
- the need to understand and adapt practices to be effective in different communities or circumstances
- the importance of working with consumers, clients and others in a collaborative and empowering way, to enhance social functioning of individuals, families, groups and communities
- the importance of being a self reflective professional, and acting consistently with professional values
- the integration of theory, practice and research
- professional and personal integrity and adaptability
- that rural practice is different from urban practice,

The student must be able to:

- understand the interconnectedness of individual, family, collective and institutional levels of practice
- use multiple methods to understand multiple levels of analysis and practice
- understand the impact of being an 'actor' within the community
- focus on redressing disadvantage
- utilize collaborative approaches where possible
- endeavour to redress the negative effects of distance on service provision
- understand and work within dense social networks
- develop strategies to access scarce specialist resources
- manage the personal and professional issues when high visibility in a community can impact on personal privacy
- juggle multiple roles with integrity and awareness of potential role conflicts

b. Recruitment and Selection

Recruitment has emphasised the rural nature of the course. The word *rural* in the title, attracts students wishing to work in rural areas. Over the past five years the percentage of rural students entering the course has been very high, between 95 - 100 %. Students have applied not only from the usual region of the University, but from other regions across Victoria.

Selection is based on academic ability, an essay, an interview and referees reports. The interest or experience of the student in rural communities forms part of the final selection decision.

c. Course structure

The course structure includes compulsory units in social science and psychology taught within the Bachelor of Arts program. These units do not have specific reference to rural issues. The compulsory welfare units, which constitute almost 50 % of the course, are generic in nature, but focus on rural practice within their content. The welfare units are:

Orientation to Welfare

- Individual and Family Counselling,
- Social Policy and Social Change in Australia,
- Working with Groups and Communities,
- Rural Australia
- Advanced practice,
- Working in Human Service Organisations
- Preparation for Professional Practice: Fieldwork 1

- Preparation for Professional Practice: Fieldwork 2
- Professional Practice and Research

Students complete two fieldwork placements, (70 days) in agencies under professional supervision. Agencies are located in rural towns or regional centres. Liaison workers from the university are experienced rural practitioners, and placement helps identify strategies for students to use to address some of the personal and professional issues arising from rural practice, as well as developing integration of theory, practice, and research.

Benefits to participating agencies of taking students on placement include developing new programs, providing service, completing community development projects and undertaking evaluation or research in their communities.

Rather than consigning rural practice to "an elective" or one unit, the rural nature of practice is discussed in every welfare unit. Students are encouraged to learn the theories, knowledge and skills of generic welfare practice, and then explore how these might be affected by a rural context, and how strategies might need to be modified, to address particular concerns.

d. Examples of curriculum design

The *Rural Australia* unit comprises a social, political, structural and cultural analysis, combined with a focus on community development knowledge, skills and approaches. Students work in small groups, often with members of the public, or community groups, to investigate issues, and publish a report with recommendations, on problems experienced within local rural communities. Such reports have proved invaluable to local communities, who can take action to redress identified problems.

Examples of projects includes:

- Access issues for young people in Clunes: the need for improved public transport
- Child care needs of parents in Creswick and Daylesford,
- Drug and Alcohol Abuse in Rural Areas: Western region
- Effects of the Withdrawal of Banking, Education and Health Services on Rural Communities.

The *Working with Groups and Communities* unit uses case studies to demonstrate the need for sensitivity to the networks and other relationships that members of a group may have. Confidentiality and privacy, between group members and within their other relationships, can be more complex than first appears, due to the formal and informal social networks occurring in rural communities. While this may not be exclusive to rural practice, given the dense networks and the lower population, it is a problem that frequently occurs, and has very serious consequences for individuals, and for effectiveness of programs.

The impact of socialisation and culture must also be acknowledged. There are difficulties for recruiting group members to talk about personal problems in a social culture, which reinforces the notions of the "country Aussie battler" who gets through despite all odds and never grumbles.

The unit examines the difficulties in getting certain groups together because of the population base, or the dynamics of a particular community. Examples are parents of children with disabilities who may have no one within their community in a similar situation. Active discouragement by some members of a community regarding the establishment of particular groups: eg groups for lesbian or gay people may occur. Establishment of these groups must be planned sensitively and carefully to protect the privacy of individuals and to address group members concerns.

Students are encouraged to develop strategies to deal with the unexpected, to plan ahead, and to explore the potential of new technology such as teleconferencing which may be utilised to offer a "group" to people with specific needs. Students will prepare a plan to offer such a group, using current research and theory on group work, integrated with an analysis of the benefits and limitations of using such technology , and strategies to address any personal, professional or ethical issues that may arise.

Community based groups, and social action groups are a feature of this unit, and these theories and approaches are also reiterated within *Rural Australia.*. Developing and supporting community groups, leading from "behind", empowering people in communities are explored with a strong emphasis on sensitivity to individuals and their 'place' within their community, and the need to practice community development approaches within all aspects of welfare service delivery.

e. Learning and Assessment Tasks:

Learning and assessment tasks are developed within an educational approach emphasising deep learning and the integration of theory practice and research with an applied focus. Within this framework there is strong emphasis on professional values and expertise, and different learning styles are accommodated.

Assessment tasks frequently mirror tasks from the experience of workers in rural communities, and combine research, theoretical and philosophical questions, within a practical task. Groups of students work towards designing a practical approach to a particular set of circumstances. Within this task they must examine their personal and professional values and philosophies, link their approach with relevant theories, consider the style of practice, and the nature of the problems engaged, and identify and develop strategies to address the probable practice, ethical and professional dilemmas that may arise. In this way, students are encouraged to think creatively, within a professional framework, and develop teamwork and project management skills. Tasks are designed to encourage

adaptable approaches, and to highlight the need for highly developed analytical and planning skills, while working in a participatory and empowering manner.

f. Student and Graduate Feedback

Students and graduates report a very high level of satisfaction with the course structure, the teaching methodologies and learning tasks. A recent survey of graduates indicated the course had developed characteristics such as:

- Adaptability
- Analytical skills
- Interpersonal communication skills
- Teamwork
- Ability to operate in the wider context
- Leadership
- Critical evaluation of information
- Interconnectedness of fields
- Understanding of professional and ethical issues
- Counselling skills
- Working with communities
- breadth of vision
- self reflection/self evaluation
- understanding theory and practice
- initiative
- flexibility
- negotiation skills
- design strategies to solve problems

Other indications in the review, of successful outcomes, were that the majority of students obtained work in a relevant field within six months of graduation, and most were working in rural areas or regional towns. Income levels were reasonably high for new graduates, and the information from the employers was very favourable, with comments made about enhanced conceptual ability, and practice skills. The fieldwork placements were seen as instrumental to achieving good outcomes for students, with many students being offered employment by their fieldwork agency on completion of the fieldwork placement.

Conclusion

The work of rural practitioners is challenging and rewarding. Graduates need to be adequately prepared to undertake the responsibility of rural practice, and develop personal and professional strategies to deal with the range of demands and the lack of personal privacy which can occur when working and living in rural communities. Courses in welfare and social work should be encouraged to integrate some rural examples of practice within the curriculum, rather than marginalising rural practice to a "elective" within their course. Such integration, together with a thorough examination of personal, professional and ethical issues, can prepare graduates to not only survive rural practice, but to thrive in this environment to the benefit of their clients and their communities.

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